**What can the COVID-19 crisis teach us about the importance of geographical communities to enable human connection?**

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Currently, [over 30% of the world’s population](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8150501/Map-shows-worlds-population-coronavirus-lockdown.html) faces stay-at-home measures in an effort to stop the spread of the Coronavirus. While necessary to tackle this global pandemic, extended physical distancing is causing another global crisis as people face mounting social isolation, disconnection, loneliness, and depression. To make up for the loss of physical human connections, people and organizations are creating virtual communities by relying heavily on technologies such as social media and web conferencing. Nevertheless, virtual interactions are an [imperfect substitute for physical human connection](https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2020/03/social-distancing-coronavirus-videochat-facetime/608038/), as is becoming more evident with each passing day of social distancing. The intensity of the current situation offers us insight into the importance of human connection and local community to foster individual and collective well-being. It also allows us to see more clearly how we have increasingly squandered these valuable assets in our daily lives and what we might need to do once we emerge from physical distancing to appreciate these opportunities again.

In recent decades, our global economic systems have led us to collectively experience alienation and disenfranchisement. Economic transactions increasingly occur between nameless and faceless ‘others’ in places far away from us. If you order some household product on Amazon, it will arrive at your door – sometimes within hours – but without any contact with the people who made it, transported it, or economically benefitted from it. The manufacturers and sellers have little information on, or contact with, individual consumers except perhaps having data about our buying habits and customer profiles to sell us more goods whether or not we really want or need them. This transactional and remote economy offers limited opportunities for human connection and empathy. When we buy a book online, we miss out on conversations with people at our local bookstore. When we order groceries to be delivered to our door[, we miss out on recommendations for new products from the store clerk](https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20171115006152/en/STUDY-Consumers-In-Store-Experience-Staff-Interaction), or from meeting the growers of our produce at a farmer’s market. Our globalized and virtual economic exchanges afford us great efficiency at the expense of human interaction and community. But what if businesses sought to enhance human experiences instead of diminishing them? What if business nourished human connection for long-term sustainability, rather than depleting them in the interest of short-term profits?

Our research team has [been studying one organization](https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026619837131) that puts community and connection at the heart of its mission. The Fogo Island Inn, which seeks to create meaningful jobs to stimulate the economy of Fogo Island, Newfoundland, Canada, also fuels community and connection. This small community of 2500 people has suffered significant job losses and economic decline starting in 1992 when the Government of Canada imposed a moratorium on cod fishing following years of decline of cod stocks from global industrial fishing.

This award-winning Inn is not your ordinary high-end boutique hotel. It is a community enterprise, whose surpluses are all reinvested into the community through [Shorefast](http://www.shorefast.org), a registered Canadian charity that operates the Inn and whose mission is to build economic and cultural resilience for communities on Fogo Island.

Shorefast’s efforts have sparked a renaissance on Fogo Island that is drawing global attention for its place-based approach that honors the community’s traditions, culture and natural assets, while also putting human connection at the heart of its business model. For instance, one simple definition of hospitality as “the love of a stranger” guides Inn employees’ approach to the guest. In addition, when making decisions, Shorefast leaders ask how business-minded ways can be deployed to achieve meaningful experiences for guests, employees, and community members. Unlike elite resorts that separate resort guests from the communities in which they are located, every guest of the Fogo Island Inn is paired with a community host, who provides guests with [an unscripted tour of the Island](https://www.indagare.com/destinations/north-america/canada/other-recommended-hotels-canada/hotels/fogo-island-inn). The only ask of the community hosts is that they treat the guest as they would a visiting friend, that is, with care and concern. At the Fogo Island Inn, authentic human connections between people from very different worlds create a deep contrast to the anonymous, isolating exchanges across our economy.

In addition to enhancing the well-being of its own community, Shorefast is also working to share its place-centered approaches globally. For example, Shorefast has developed an Economic NutritionCM Certification Mark (ENCM) modeled after the nutrition labels found on processed foods. The ENCM is designed to “[bring transparency to where the money from your purchase goes—how it will be invested in the local community and how it impacts the broader economy](https://woodshopfogoisland.ca/pages/economic-nutrition).” In so doing, Shorefast hopes to enable consumers to make more principled decisions and support local economies, thereby strengthening geographic communities and the human connections they support. Shorefast has started using the ENCM on their own products such as their locally-made quilts and wood furniture, and is now working on promoting the mark globally, thereby contributing to a growing movement around the world that aims to reconnect capital and community while nurturing personal connections.

With the large-scale social isolation that has resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witnessing the effects of the growing loss of human connection more quickly and intensely than we have in the past, in which the movement towards anonymous and virtual exchanges happened much more slowly. Like a frog in boiling water, we did not fully appreciate the social and environmental consequences inherent in our technological advancements and our globalized economic system until now.

The current crisis is putting into sharp focus how virtual human connections are a highly imperfect substitute for physical human contact and place-based geographic communities. The longer we self-isolate and are quarantined, [the higher the rates and intensity of loneliness and depression](https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/09/health/coronavirus-mental-health-long-term-wellness/index.html) despite our best efforts to stay connected virtually. The current pandemic may be an opportunity for us to rethink our current trajectory and business models. And it may propel us to better support organizations, like the Fogo Island Inn, that nurture communities, rather than supporting organizations that are slowly depleting human connection.